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A Postmodern Reading of Don DeLillo's Short Stories

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to study how different techniques are incorporated in the postmodern fiction to present the multiplicity of meaning and subjectivity of the reality. For this purpose, the researcher has selected American novelist and short story writer Donald Richard DeLillo's short stories "The Itch" and "Coming. Sun. Mon. Tues". The researcher has analyzed the selected works using the theoretical frameworks provided by Fredric Jameson, Linda Hutcheon and Henri Bergson. The theoretical insights of the selected theorists help understand the subjective reality of the postmodernism. Textual analysis has been used as a method to study the selected fictional work. Postmodernism is critical of certain foundational conventions of philosophy, specifically, the Enlightenment thinking, as it symbolizes the pursuit of reason and logic. On the other hand, it focuses on the personalization and subjectivity in the construction of truth and worldviews. The rejection of objective reality gives way to multiple realities and subjectivity. American fiction, in the second half of the twentieth century, has been influenced by postmodernism to a great extent. The analyzed short stories provide a good postmodern reading since they cover a range of features that are relatable in the postmodern world.

Keywords: multiplicity, postmodernism, subjectivity, depthless-ness, fragmented reality

Introduction

While modernism reflected the anxiety, fear, directionless-ness and dread of early twentieth century man, postmodernism emerged as a movement that celebrated chaos and subjective truth. Postmodernism is a movement in arts, architecture and literature that denies the presence of objective reality and objective truth. The exact year and date of the beginning of postmodernism is difficult to be marked, but its birth is associated with French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard's work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report of Knowledge* (1979).

American fiction, in the second half of the twentieth century, has been influenced by postmodernism to a great extent. John Barth is considered to have

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theorized the postmodern fiction through his essay “Literature of Exhaustion” (1967). In this essay, Barth dismisses realism as a faded tradition and defines his own work as “novels which imitate the form of the novel, by an author who imitates the role of the Author” (Barth, 1984, pp. 62-77). John Barth supports the break from traditional rules of writing fiction by justifying the lack of originality in the contemporary writings. According to him, all the techniques followed by the traditional writers have been consumed to the point of depletion. Barth praises Jorge Luis Borges for creating newness out of the earlier authorial styles through experimentation. After “Death of the Author” (1967) by Roland Barthes, this work of John Barth’s further consolidates the severing of postmodernist fiction from the modernist writing conventions by allowing the authors a freedom for trying new ways.

About the Author

Donald Richard DeLillo (1936), known as Don DeLillo, is among the contemporary postmodern writers. He is an American novelist, playwright, essayist and short story writer. *Americana* (1993), *Underworld* (1999), *Zero K* (2016), and *White Noise* (2016) are amongst his notable fictional works. A collection of short stories, *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories*, has been published in a chronological order between years 1979 to 2011. Some of DeLillo’s stories have been published in *The New Yorker*. DeLillo’s fictional works cover various postmodern themes including commodity fetishism, consumerism, post-humanism and underground conspiracies. In an interview to the *Chicago Tribune*, DeLillo described his work’s inspiration as “I think my work is influenced by the fact that we’re living in the dangerous times” (Nance, 2012).

Literature Review

The two terms ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ are frequently used in the contemporary world. Modernism can be defined as a philosophical, literary, cultural, and social movement that occurred as a reaction against the conservative values of realism. It rejected the certainty of enlightened thinking and human prosperity that prevailed through most part of the nineteenth century. It was a major break from the Victorian tradition, aimed to address human isolation, anxiety and uncertainty caused by the World War I. There is a significant amount of literary scholarship available on postmodern studies and short fiction. The short story named, “The Itch”, by Don DeLillo provides excellent postmodern critique. The story is about a man who is a middle-aged divorcee, it reflects multiple postmodern themes and is not like a traditional story. Postmodern concerns such as consumerism and commodity fetishism are a part of it. The story’s protagonist

stares at the building in front of his office but does not pay attention to the people living in that building, he only looks at the windows absentmindedly. He goes to the theatre with a girl who could be his girlfriend or just an acquaintance, but he appears to be more interested in the empty seats of cinema than actually being with her. The readers are introduced to the protagonist's friend, Joel, who keeps talking about poetry and strange 'voice' that he hears when he urinates. All these events have been jotted down in a non-linear order. DeLillo has broken the traditional boundaries of writing stories and has divided the story into unsystematic parts with no links with one another. The protagonist plans to go out with his friend and his girlfriend but ends up watching a football game on television, he does not skip the commercials even. Consumerism and commodity fetishism are infused into this short fiction so well that they constitute a major portion in the story. Fredric Jameson, in his essay "Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" suggested that postmodernity has converted everything into a commodity and 'image' which has led humans to a new kind of flatness or 'depthless-ness' (Newton, [1997](#), p. 272).

The protagonist of the story proves to be postmodern in this way, he is leading a dreary, 'depthless' life. When a colleague asks the protagonist if he would like to live forever, he replies that he will perhaps jump off the window one day. All these descriptions show that the man is living an exhausting life, and he does not know how to un-stuck himself. One repeatedly mentioned problem with the protagonist is that he has chronic itch. However, his literal itch can be analyzed as a metaphor for unfulfilled desire that constantly irritates his physical self. But he is unable to detect it or do anything about it.

"But nobody showed up, so he sat awhile looking at the wall. It was one of those Saturdays that felt like Sunday. He didn't know how to explain this" (DeLillo, [2017](#)).

The two starting sentences put readers into frenzy. DeLillo's smart use of the words make it an excellent postmodernist work with multiplicity of meanings. Bergson's idea of coexistence of time is hinged upon this story. Although Bergson was writing during Victorian age when science, logic and reason was at the peak, but he decided to break away from the tradition and criticized the scientific conception of time. Bergson's theory of duration avers that all moments of time coexist. According to Paul Douglass, in a letter to William James written in 1908, Henri Bergson said that examining the notion of time has changed his ideas and claimed, "Scientific time does not endure" (Douglass, [2014](#)).

According to Caporaletti, the duration '*durée*' or real time, for Bergson is a spherical dimension where past, present and future coexist and help shape each other.

Fallon (2014) describes duration as: Real duration is the dynamic temporality of one's psychic experience that exists within the self in relation and in response to temporality in general... It is only in moments of real duration or immediate experience that the self of an individual experiences reality, yet this reality is not one of permanent or eternal forms, but one of immanent flow.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The design adopted to carry out the research is Qualitative.

Research Method

The research has been conducted through the textual analysis of the selected stories. This method of analysis focuses on the text, the context of the text and its effect on the readers/interpreters. Multiple meanings can be deduced from a piece of literature by different readers using the textual analysis method; this analysis method favors the researcher's conclusions rather than what has already been deduced about it.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher has identified the postmodern techniques that are incorporated in the selected texts through the lens of postmodernism. Moreover, it has been explored that multiplicity of meaning and subjectivity of reality are demonstrated in the primary texts. The researcher has opted for textual analysis as a research method for analyzing the literature. The framework for the present study comprises of the theoretical insights from Fredric Jameson, Linda Hutcheon and Henri Bergson. The hybrid framework helps understand and analyze the texts on various levels. Jameson's essay "Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1989) advocates that postmodernity has transformed everything into a commodity; he also proposes that commodity fetishism has led humans to a kind of depthlessness. While Linda Hutcheon in her essay, "Theorizing the Postmodern" (1997) talks about the blurred margins and boundaries of the postmodern world that are reflected in postmodern writings. She proposes that we can no longer draw a line between different genres, as they merge together. Similarly, Henri Bergson's insight gives a theoretical backing to this study as he focuses on the coexistence of future, past and present. If future, past and present coexist, then the sense of time also blurs.

Henceforth, in this study, the researcher has highlighted the prospects of postmodernism in the aforementioned texts.

Textual Analysis

The short story called, “The Itch”, by Don DeLillo is one of his latest works, published in The New Yorker in August 7&14, 2017 issue. The story provides an excellent postmodern critique. It opens with the connective ‘but’ as if it is a continuation of an ongoing story. DeLillo’s protagonist, whose name is not revealed till the last line of the story, seems to be facing the same problem with the time. He is unable to differentiate between Saturday and Sunday, he cannot explain why he feels the way he feels. The subjectivity of his experience constitutes his reality which is different from the scientific time. The story is fragmented into parts with no apparent connections with one another. While the first part describes the protagonist’s meaningless stares at the wall, the next action takes place in a shop where he tests the shoes before buying them. After that, the protagonist is in his office, staring at the front building blankly. Depthless-ness is at the heart of the story and it is reflected by the actions of the protagonist, whose actions carry no deep meaning and he seems to have no control over them. The narrator says:

“...nothing was visible inside the rows of windows. There were times when he could not stop looking” (DeLillo, [2017](#)).

In the next part of the story his literal itch is mentioned for the first time. The protagonist itches his arms.

“Certain days it’s the left wrist. Upper arms at home in the evening. Thighs and shins most likely at night. When he’s out walking, it happens now and then, mostly forearms” (DeLillo, [2017](#)).

In the lines mentioned above, the narrator gives the details of the protagonist’s itch. As discussed earlier, what has been described as a literal itch can be analyzed as a metaphor for desire(s). It is not just one part of his body that itches. Different body parts itch throughout the day. It signifies the unfulfilled human desires.. The protagonist appears to be longing intimacy and connectivity. His life lacks excitement and deep connection with other people. The narrator explains the man’s itch as:

“...data from the exterior, caused by some outlying substance, unanalyzable, the air in the room or on the street or in the atmosphere itself, a corruption of the planetary environment” (DeLillo, [2017](#)).

These lines convey multiple meanings and cover postmodern themes of postwar world as well as post-humanism. The words ‘corruption of planetary environment’ reflect the corruption of governments and the world in general after the world wars. The description of itch as something ‘unanalyzable’ and ‘data from exterior’ subtly hint at the post-human intervention. The effects of the environment on humans which are beyond their control and the effects of modern technology on human lives have been represented. The multiplicity of meaning and absence of ‘objective’ reality lies in the description of the protagonist’s ‘itch’ which has not been explained in a definite manner.

More textual evidence to prove that the literal ‘itch’ is actually used as a metaphor for desire is supported by Joel’s character. Joel works in the same office with the protagonist, wants to write poetry but he is unable to get his work published. The narrator tells:

“There were times, standing over the toilet bowl at home, when he heard what sounded like words as his urine hit the water in the bowl... Words. He heard the semblance of a tiny voice saying a word” (DeLillo, [2017](#)).

Joel is so obsessed with writing poetry that he listens to words when he is urinating, he shares his experience with the protagonist and tells him that he is not ‘imagining’ this. This shows his state of unrest and desperation to fulfill his desire of writing or perhaps getting recognized as a poet.

Through Joel’s character, the narrator breaks free from the traditional forms of writing and mocks the so called ‘rational’ thinking. The rejection of grandnarrative of rationality, acceptance of multiple realities and mini-narratives have been projected through Joel’s dialogues. He says:

“Words and letters are free, outside reason and tradition. When was it ever the case,” Joel said, “that language could truly describe reality?” (DeLillo, [2017](#)).

The lines above seem to be standing upon Jean Baudrillard’s concept of hyper-reality. It implies a shift from certainty to uncertainty, from order to chaos, from reality to hyper-reality. Douglass Kellner in his book *Jean Baudrillard from Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* states that for Baudrillard the simulation and simulacra plays an important role in social life due to which the earlier borders of social theory melt together. The divisions between reality and fiction, subject and object, surface, and depth dissolve together into a “self-reproducing universe of simulacra controlled by simulation models and codes” (Kellner, [1990](#), p.77). Other than the implied hyper-reality, these lines are significantly postmodernist in nature because the idea hints at multiple realities and multiple truths instead of one

objective truth. The narrator seems to be mocking the tradition for believing in objective reality and questions the very possibility of that. The narrator is mocking the enlightened belief of objective reality in favor of subjective truth and multiple realities.

The story proceeds in the same fragmented manner, a few dialogues, descriptions of the protagonist's surrounding with the constant mention of the 'itch' that does not go away. The protagonist sees several doctors, uses medications, and complains that it starts when he takes his clothes off. He goes to a new doctor and says:

"I take off my shirt or my pants and the itch begins. Or the itch is just there, comes and goes, night and day" (DeLillo, [2017](#)).

The doctor prescribes some ointments, keeps listing names of different types of itch, and seems to be more interested in talking to the walls or some hidden recording devices than the patient. All these actions contribute to the mood of the story where nothing makes sense apparently and the protagonist remains in the state of a constant unrest. He visits another doctor who, after examining him, says:

"Do not let others scratch your itch. It will not succeed," she said. "You yourself must scratch" (DeLillo, [2017](#)).

Everything that the doctor says seems so superficial to him and has no long-lasting impact on his routine. His doctor's visits and attempts to connect with the girl called Ana are shallow and perfunctory with no depth and meaning. The people around him contribute to the general depthless-ness. Like this doctor who speaks into free space.

"He liked listening to her but she was speaking into free space" (DeLillo, [2017](#)).

In one of the final scenes, the protagonist tries to count the steps while climbing the staircase, he loses count and decides to go back to start over. This is when he recalls buying shoes from a shop, which he had bought after careful examination. He does not even like the shoes and thinks why he bought them in the first place. Fredric Jameson's idea of commodity fetishism in his essay "Postmodern and Consumer Society" can be used to describe the protagonist's need to buy products that he does not even like. The need to buy and consume material goods shows the commodity fetishism of the protagonist, which is one of the major features of postmodernism. The following lines reflect commodity fetishism, protagonist's confusion and his skepticism about objective truth, thus remaining disordered about life.

“Was it too much trouble, too awkward, to tell the salesman that he didn’t want the shoes? He didn’t know the answer, but he was beginning to feel victimized, belatedly, by the salesman, the shoe store, and the shoes, and he stopped counting the steps” (DeLillo, [2017](#)).

The protagonist remains in a state of prevailing confusion that does not lead him to any closure. Perhaps, ‘counting the steps’ also refers to his desire to bring order in his chaotic life. But that desire is transient because, in the end, he stops doing that and it signifies the celebration of chaos in the postmodern world. The depth has been replaced by the surface or multiple surfaces.

Till the end there are no signs of closure or one truth. Life is fragmented and so are the actions of the characters in the story.

“…she used the three middle fingers of one hand to brush lightly. A gesture of remembrance, anxious or soothing—he wasn’t sure” (DeLillo, [2017](#)).

The protagonist’s observation about the people around him is also fragmented and does not lead towards a single direction. When the protagonist meets Ana in the beginning, the way Ana spells her name that intrigues his attention. The fragmentation of the name, the missing N, but towards the end of the story, her gestures confuse him. He is not sure what she means to convey with her body movements as mentioned in the lines above. Again, it shows the relativity of truth and presence of many surfaces in the story. It is only in the last line that the protagonist’s name is revealed.

“This is how near-sleep attenuates a person’s awareness. Everything else is gone. He is funneled into himself, no past or future, the living itch, man-shaped, Robert T. Waldron, thinking incoherently, a body in a bedsheets” (DeLillo, [2017](#)).

The ending, apparently seems to be joining the fragmented links but it is difficult to presume it to be an actual closure to Robert T. Waldron’s life or the story itself. He is in an empty space with no sense of time and space, no past or future defining his reality. He is just a body wrapped in a bedsheets.

Coming. Sun. Mon. Tues- Don DeLillo

The story, “Coming. Sun. Mon. Tues” is another archetypal postmodern story by Don DeLillo. Linda Hutcheon’s essay “Theorizing the Postmodern” provides an excellent pedestal to analyze this story’s form. The story’s title “Coming. Sun. Mon. Tues” in itself is unique and does not tell the readers anything about the story. The story has been written in one long paragraph unlike the fragmented sections

observed in the earlier analyzed story “The Itch”. However, having no apparent fragmentation, does not make the story any less fragmented in nature. The writer has broken free from conventional rules of writing and character description. There are sudden shifts and breaks in the sentences. DeLillo has used short and abrupt sentences. Although, the story appears to be a love story, but in real, it is only a parody of a typical fancy love story in which a girl meets a boy, they share moments together and then get a happy ever after in a linear order.

Postmodern world rejects moral absolutism and believes in the multiplicity of meanings in fragmented form. Linda Hutcheon believes that the debate about the margins and boundaries of conventions is a result of “postmodern transgressing of previously accepted limits” (Newton, [1997](#)). According to Linda Hutcheon, in postmodernism, the boundaries of genres have been blurred. Line cannot be drawn between different genres and they seem to be merging together.

The story under discussion distorts fairytale stories. Right from the beginning of the story, the third person narrator gives fragmented details about a girl and a boy, their names have not been mentioned in the story.

“It is Fifth Avenue in late afternoon in autumn and the shadows darken the street. The boy wears a heavy sweater and desert boots. He has long hair. The girl is pretty” (DeLillo, [1966](#)). The characters of the story have not been described like characters of fairytales which are usually developed from start till the end of the narrative. The narrator has just thrown the characters in the story with short abrupt sentences and surface details like boy’s hair or girl’s sweater. There is no mention of the background of these characters.

Along with the distortion of fairytale, the narrator seems to be lost in time and space. There is no sense of time and space throughout the mentioned events of the story. Bergson’s idea of coexistence of time is hinged upon this story. The duration ‘durée’ or real time, for Bergson is a spherical dimension where past, present and future coexist and help shape each other. The same happens in the story multiple times.

The narrator gives a surreal effect while describing the places casually. It becomes difficult to fixate on one meaning or a single reality. The narrator describes the sunset as:

“The sun is going down behind the Dakota Apartments or the London Hilton (DeLillo, [1966](#)).

The multiplicity of meanings has also been conveyed through the vague description of directions as well as the characters. While giving the surface details of the character, the narrator says:

“He chain-smokes and drinks a lot of wine. It is Greenwich Village or the West Side. It is either of those or it is Soho or it is Montmartre” (DeLillo, [1966](#)).

There is hardly any sense of time duration and direction. From the lines quoted above the reader cannot tell whether the character is in Greenwich Village or West Side, he could be in either of those or none of those, or in a totally different direction. There is no single reality describing the location of the character.

The whole story seems to be playing on a fast-forward mode with events switching in the blink of an eye.

In one scene, the boy and the girl are making faces in the mirror together and in the next moment the boy kisses the girl and she becomes pregnant. The idea of getting pregnant with a kiss seems absurd and unconvincing. Writer has used magical realism to break boundaries of traditional fiction. Therefore, mixed fact and fiction in such a way that it becomes almost impossible to separate reality from fiction. The short abrupt sentences with no paragraphs break the traditional rule of writing stories in well-developed paragraphs to maintain the flow of the events.

“Then the boy and girl go to a store in San Francisco or Toronto or Liverpool...Dessert is chocolate cake. Her mother wants to know why she’s failing Civics and Arithmetic and where she’s been the last three days and nights” (DeLillo, [1966](#)).

The mention of three different cities in three countries reflects that there is no sense of direction. Even in the contemporary world of technology and fast conveyance it is impossible to be in all three places at once. The mother’s enquiry makes the stream of events even more unbelievable. In three days and nights the girl met a random boy, went to different places with him, got pregnant and got back to her house. The use of magical realism is quite evident in these lines.

In the final scenes of the story, the narrator says that the boy goes to a bar and gets arrested but no details have been provided about the reason of his arrest. His father bails him out of the jail. In the next scene, the girl packs her bags and leaves home.

“Then the girl comes in with her suitcase and they start to live together...They go to Coney Island or Brighton. They ride on the roller coaster and the carousel and they look at themselves in the distorted mirrors” (DeLillo, [1966](#)). There is no sense

of time and direction in the lines quoted above. It is not sure whether they go to Brighton or Coney Island. Moreover, there are no dialogues in the story. The story distorts characteristics of a typical tale, it has been written in present tense unlike stories that are written in past tense. Traditionally, a fairytale consists of clearly developed good and evil characters that are set in the past. It entails enchanted settings like castles, kingdoms and forests, clearly defined problem, climax and resolution, and, at the end, gives a moral lesson to the readers. But the story by DeLillo does not cover any of these characteristics of a fairytale, therefore it seems to be distorting and mocking the traditional fairytale stories. The readers do not get to know the names of the "hero and heroine", the characters have not been described in the detail. Till the end of the story, the narrator tells bare minimum details about the physical appearances of the characters. Therefore, it can be said that DeLillo has merged the boundaries of different genres into one story, by breaking the traditional boundaries of writing through the use of postmodern writing techniques. The multiplicity of reality has been conveyed by the characters looking at themselves in 'distorted mirrors'. Looking in 'distorted mirrors' shows the depthless-ness and presence of multiple realities and surfaces in postmodernism. Though, in the last line, the characters go home together but it is far from a conventional ending. Unlike traditional story that ends with a proper conclusion to the unfolded events-, this postmodern story ends abruptly without any closure.

Conclusion

To sum up everything that has been stated so far, it is pertinent to reiterate that postmodernism is critical of certain foundational conventions of philosophy. Contemporary American fiction, influenced by postmodernism, demonstrates multiplicity of meanings and subjective reality. Postmodernism rejects objective reality and promotes relative truths by focusing on subjectivity and open-endedness. This rejection of objective reality has been identified in the selected primary texts. Moreover, the study has highlighted the presence of multiple surfaces, fragmented reality and blurred genres in the selected pieces of contemporary American fiction.

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